



## How Filmmaker Cristina Ibarra Cultivated a Junk Aesthetic

Growing up near the U.S.-Mexico border, she became obsessed with questions of belonging. Now, the newly-minted MacArthur Genius is using film to explore those same themes and shine light on stories that too often go untold.

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Alicia Menendez:

Growing up in El Paso, Christina Ibarra felt invisible. So she spent her career as a documentarian, making sure that others feel seen. That work has now been recognized by the MacArthur Foundation, with a genius grant. In fact, Christina and her creative life partner, Alex Rivera, are the first married couple to each individually win the award.

Christina and I talk about how she has cultivated a junk aesthetic, a yonke aesthetic, her gutsy first foray into film, and how she has seen firsthand in very real ways how film can change lives.

Christina, thank you so much for doing this.

Cristina Ibarra: Yeah. Sure. This is great.

Menendez: Christina, you grew up in El Paso. You say you come from a long line of border-crossers. Can you share with me your earliest or most vivid memory of crossing the border yourself?

Ibarra: This might not necessarily be the first memory, but I can tell you what it was traditionally like. My father, he owned an operated Yonke Juarez, in Juarez, which is a junkyard. Where I'm from, that's what we call a junkyard. We call it, Yonke. My mother helped run the one in El Paso. And so there was this back and forth, that was pretty much daily that was happening.

And what I remember the most is driving in an air conditioned car in the summer. This is the most vivid memory that I have, is driving in the summer and just looking out the window and wondering, why it was that as we were coming back from visiting my grandmother and Juarez, we're waiting in a specific line because I would look over to the side and I would see many types of folks, but I was focusing on girls that looked like me, brown skin, dark hair, maybe seven, nine years old. And they were waiting in line outside in the hot sun with a parent.

I just thought, wow, that could be me. What's the difference between her, standing in a line in the hot sun, having to discuss her documents, and myself, who's in this very comfortable car, waiting to cross the line on the bridge, just by saying the word American. It was like this magic word. I don't know if it was just one time that this happened, but I just remember that feeling because it's this questioning of, how do we define who belongs, that's just been plaguing me ever since those border crossings of my early days of my childhood.

Menendez: You often describe yourself growing up in El Paso as feeling invisible. And I've often heard you talk about it as though there was shame to having grown up there. What was the source of that shame?

Ibarra: It's very easy to feel like you don't matter, if you don't see yourself. Even looking in the mirror, it's like you try to look beyond the brown skin, because I represented, at least for myself, when I was growing up, were white people. They were Mexicans or they were Americans, it didn't matter. I saw the airwaves from both countries, but that really does instill this idea that you're not worthy, that you don't matter, that your ideas or what you think is less important.

It's very subtle. The simple fact that you see yourself represented can create this sense of power that you can really use to do anything you want. That's what I remember growing up. I would look out and I would look at people who had power, in my eyes, and somehow they always seemed to be white. And it just seemed natural, I didn't question it. And I thought, oh well, that's who we see had stories and having coming of age stories. Those are the folks that fall in love. Yeah. So they're the ones who I'm going to see holding these positions that will determine really, questions that will shape my own future.

It's not until I can leave where I was from, that I could really explore that, that's really something that's constructed. It's not natural, and it's not normal, even though you're just so accustomed to it. And then deeper questions evolve from there. How did this become the status quo? What are the other stories that we haven't heard, that might help us change that? I really feel like stories build power in that way.

Menendez: You're the first in your family to go to college, yes?

Ibarra: Yeah. I'm one in my family to go to college.

Menendez: What was the expectation of what you would come back with?

Ibarra: So I joke around because I feel like this is common with many children of immigrant parents, but I feel like if you're the child of an immigrant family, you are going to be either a doctor or a lawyer.

Menendez: There are only two options. This podcast could be called recovering doctor, recovering lawyer, 90%.

Ibarra: Yeah. Exactly. Yeah, and sometimes engineer. And because there's this idea that the reason that you're going to college as the first one in your family, is so that you can get a step ahead, so that you can break this cycle of poverty. You can do that by making more money and helping the family. So those were the ideas that I had going into college.

My sister decided she would be a doctor. She truly loves it. I think I was just searching. It's like, okay, so I'll be the lawyer. And it came from this deep desire to be a part of the family, in a way that was going to help us achieve more of our dreams. Going to college, I was so privileged and I was able to explore different subjects because you can go apply to law school with any degree, really. So it allowed me the opportunity to explore. And I discovered two things that really changed the trajectory of my entire life. The first thing I discovered was that there was this Chicano history that I was completely unaware of.

Menendez: Just wild. If anywhere should have been making you aware of Chicano history, it should have been deep south Texas.

Ibarra: Exactly. And one of the things that I learned is, El Paso was a cradle for much movement during the Chicano movement. I just didn't know about it. It wasn't valued, so it wasn't taught in schools and my parents were immigrants. So they didn't really connect to the Chicano movement, but it was very important to me, and it changed my outlook on life. And it was a way to almost make sense of things. Oh, these feelings, that we were talking about earlier about shame and feeling invisible, they all started to make sense. And so I was able to then look at what was an internal obstacle versus a systematic one.

The second thing I discovered was media making. I was very naive, thinking that you don't make films. You just watch them. If you don't like what you're watching, you change the channel, or you don't buy that movie ticket. The idea that you could make your own film, just blew me away. The idea that I had something to say that was really upset about, and that I had a medium to do that in, it's almost like my vehicle became film.

And my first films were very much about exploring my own voice. They were done in a way where, I would call them agitprop today, because they were just like, trying to shout almost, this is what I believed. You're not going to keep me silent anymore. But that was the early days. My connection to film has truly evolved, from one of anger, to contemplation, to really love of the craft.

Menendez: Well, let's talk about some of your early shouting. Tell me about Dirty Laundry: A Homemade Telenovela.

Ibarra: Dirty Laundry: A Homemade Telenovela, is my first short film out of college. And it's exploring young female desire, from the point of view of a young girl who discovers masturbating when she's sitting on top of a washing machine. It's a funny irreverent film. It's also set up during the day before the protagonists, not her quinceanera, but her cousin's quinceanera.

And so we have the Catholic church, the role of women, becoming this melodramatic force in this young girl's life, as she's trying to contemplate, whether she's going to confess her discovery at the Catholic ritual, which is a Mass and a party. The family is just upset with this young girl, who's ruining the party, basically.

Menendez: Here's the piece though, that you were leaving out, which is that you cast your own family members in this project.

Ibarra: Yeah. Thank you for bringing that up.

Menendez: That is ballsy because given the subject matter and the taboo.

Ibarra: It was really a risk and it was both fun and scary to try to open up these conversations with family members, as I was looking for support because I have no money. I'm making my first film. I'm finding these home movies in my closet, re-appropriating them, I'm taking scraps of media, but I also have to create my own fiction. So I need actors and I can't pay them. So here's my family, they were great. We had fun.

It's only the beginning of a long conversation with them because I haven't told you this, but when I studied film, I did it in secret because I was supposed to be studying to go to law school. And here I am studying film. I didn't know how to explain this shift to my folks. So once the cat was out of the bag, so to speak, about my degree and what I was really studying, there was a lot of tension in our family. And this was almost a way of trying to heal that tension and show them what a film could do, as opposed to just speak about it. So I recruited my family, I had them be in the film and I cut it together, however I could, a film told through scraps, scraps and lots of love and support.

Menendez: It's your yonke aesthetic.

Ibarra: That's exactly what I describe it as. Yeah, my yonke aesthetic. I really took another look at my dad's practice of rebuilding cars from the junked vehicles, taking parts that were working. That's really how I saw what I was doing. It's like, okay, so I'm going to take this part of this telenovela, this part of this home movie, and just make something new, really did become my yonke aesthetic. And that's truly where the love of the form began.

The border is so important, not just as a geographic location, but as a way of looking at the world. You can really mix Spanish and English, like the way that we say the word yonke, you can mix indigenous and colonize, the way we have mestizos. You can be inventive and playful, but have serious social issues. This can all be mixed up along the border. So I'm thinking, how can you apply that to film language? And that was my first attempt, and that's just been developing and evolving from there.

Menendez: What detoured you into documentary?

Ibarra: So what happened was, Dirty Laundry ended up playing at a lot of PBS showcases. And it's how I discovered public television as a broadcast home for myself, because here's an organization that has a mandate to be diverse. And so that's what I saw was my best access into the industry, so to speak, is to try to make films with PBS in mind as my home.

So when I thought, okay, this film ended up on PBS unintentionally, what if I'm intentional now, and I want to make something for PBS? So this is how I saw that documentary was a very fertile ground to explore a lot of the ideas that I had, but to also find a broadcast home, because I knew that there were independent strands that I was very interested in. And PBS, POV, and Independent Lens, so these were my targets when I started making documentary.

Menendez: It's interesting to me, thinking about your films, how there's clearly a central theme that runs through them. So 2008, you have *The Last Conquistador*, about a contentious plan to erect a monument of a Spanish conquistador in El Paso, 2014. I remember screaming when *Las Marthas* came out. It follows two young Mexican American girls and their family, as they prepare for the annual George and Martha Washington debutante ball in Laredo, Texas. I've never read a better tagline.

And then you have *The Infiltrators* in 2019, which is this interesting hybrid where you're both doing, in part, dramatic reenactment, and also capturing the documentary element of two undocumented activists, infiltrating an ICE detention center. So I see the thematic overview, everything you said about the border as a lens, through which you look at everything, but those are also three very different films.

Ibarra: Yes, they are. The storytelling grammar for me, has kept evolving with every film. With every new film that I start, I think about the border as a language, as a cinematic language. And I'm thinking, okay, how can we have this hybridity that's so natural along the borderlands, be a part of our storytelling style? With *The Last Conquistador*, we planned history and present tense storyline. And we are taking these images that are almost stereotypical from educational films and re-appropriating them, reframing them and telling a new story, a historical story about this one figure, who the monument is representing, Juan de Oñate.

We have these two storylines, right? So that was my attempt at trying to figure out this mixture, this hybrid form, that's really rich for me. With *Las Marthas*, we have the same idea of past tense storyline, with a present tense storyline. But then I was really looking at the gown and looking at how can the construction of this gown, this sparkly, seductive image, what's hiding behind that? What's underneath all of those fabrics and those sparkles?

So that metaphor started to lead me in this path of discovering how this was a celebration that was not just celebrating democratic values in its own way, unique way. But it was also celebrating the way that Anglo and Mexicans aligned themselves, and created these alliances that kept the status quo very similar to what it was right before the US/Mexico war, where you had a lot of the same patrónes, the same haciendas still in control. And

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almost this negotiation that you think about, when you think about assimilation in the United States.

You always think about the person who is non-white, assimilating to being white. In this case, you have a reverse assimilation. You have the immigrants who are Anglos, as trying to assimilate to being Mexican, in Mexican American town. I found it fascinating. Every film has this language where I'm just pushing that question. And I'm trying to keep myself discovering. It's a process of discovery with every film.

Menendez: Christina, what did I miss?

Ibarra: There's one story that I find interesting about the power of filmmaking. Something that I want to just talk through with you for the first time, I haven't talked to anyone about it yet. When *The Infiltrators* premiered at Sundance, Sundance wrote a letter to ICE to request that one of our protagonists attend the festival, his name is Claudio Rojas. He was the main collaborator who was inside the detention center.

When the film was about to premiere in Miami, Claudio went in for his regular check-in with ICE, and then ICE detained him. So we went in to a month of almost defense work, trying to prevent Claudios' deportation. And he was eventually deported after a month of being detained a second time. Just recently, we were able to be a part of a team that was able to bring Claudio home. It's been two and a half years of struggle. He's just been separated from his family in very terrible ways.

But one of the things that happened is that, as we worked on ways of bringing Claudio home, I also discovered how I might be able to bring my own deported family home. So I was able to reunite my uncle with his kids. He was deported 15 years ago. So was this like, working on as a filmmaker, I'm still feeling like, okay, there are still ways that I can help my family, which is the whole reason I wanted to be a lawyer in the first place.

So there's this power to film that is so real. You don't know what that story will do. You don't know how it might be therapeutic or healing, if it's a story with integrity. I just find that it's not just a saying this idea that there's power behind film. And I felt it firsthand, just in my own family.

Menendez: Christina, I have chills from that story. Is he home yet? Do we know when he's going to be home?

Ibarra: He's now home with his family.

Menendez: Both your uncle-

Ibarra: Both of them.

Menendez: Both of them.

Ibarra: Yeah. It's pretty crazy.

Menendez: It seems as though your parents, once you got through that hard period, they got on board. Has this helped them further understand the power of all of this?

Ibarra: It slowly evolved from not really understanding what I was doing to really just saying, okay, that's just who she is, she's just crazy, to now seeing, maybe there is something here to storytelling. Maybe it's a lot more important than we thought it was.

Menendez: Christina. This was such a delight. Thank you so much for doing this

Ibarra: Yeah. Thank you.

Menendez: Hey, thank you so much for listening. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantugua and me, Alicia Menendez. Sarah McClure is our senior producer. Our lead producer is Cedric Wilson. Kojin Tashiro is our associate sound designer. Stephen Colón mixed this episode. Jimmy Gutierrez is our managing editor. Manuela Bedoya is our social media editor and ad ops lead. We love hearing from your email us at hola at Latinatolatina.com. Slide into our DMs on Instagram or tweet us at Latina to Latina. Remember to subscribe or follow us on radio public, Apple podcast, Google podcast, good pods, wherever you're listening right now. And remember, every time you share the podcast or you leave a review, you help us to grow as a community.

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